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ABSTRACT

Literature can be used in a writing course if the teacher carefully chooses the literature to be studied, if the writing assignments are sequenced so that they make some kind of developmental sense, and if the writing activity is used to clarify student thinking about the literature. Attention to these three elements was essential to the success of a six-week summer course in basic writing, where the teachers grounded all writing activities in responses to literature. Using the workshop approach, they developed student writing in stages that emphasized levels of generality, subordination, and the basis of rhetorical (oral and written) discourse in probabilities. These concepts were developed by interpreting literature while coincidentally applying fundamentals of F. Christensen's rhetoric, the "TRI" pattern (topic, restriction, illustration), and Aristotle's treatment of the enthymeme. Attention to the enthymeme especially reaffirmed the teachers' resolve that teaching students how to write about a story helps them to learn how to think, how to interpret information, and how to transform external realities into internal, intellectual constructs. (RL)

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USING LITERATURE IN A BASIC WRITING COURSE

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James Moffett poses the question in his Teaching the Universe of Discourse that has been raging for some few decades in our profession: How much is teaching English a matter of teaching content and how much the teaching of skills? Though many have claimed that the learning of content (literature, genres, grammar, logic) is essential to the learning of writing skills, one leaves the presence of Moffett keenly aware of the dangers of such claims. How to keep the processes of a field from becoming things is a great worry to any sensitive teacher of writing. And yet, if the mind grows by "processing reality" it surely must matter as much to the student as to the teacher what

has been processed. As teachers of freshman English we feel called upon most often to repair the ruins of all those years of bad composition teaching. Often it seems we are tempted to try to do all that repairing in one short term or semester. Choosing to do everything is choosing to do nothing. So we have to make choices, choices we have grounded in a careful study of what the student is developmentally capable of and what it is possible to do in a short time. Given the brevity of that time, the lack of time we have to respond to their papers, we naturally want to design a program, a sequence of assignments, that is most deft in its use of time and energy. And, though we have some evidence that elementary and secondary schools do their job poorly, we must not be so hubristic as that. Something has happened there, something we must discover and then build our own courses from. The building of our courses must be done with a clear sense of direction: where the students have been and where they should be going at the end of the course.

That means, of course, we must decide what the content of a writing course should be and how it is we are going to teach students to write. About this the profession has never been very sure. Literature has been a favorite thing to have in a course, perhaps, because the English professor has known about that field of study, even if he or she knew little about grammar, rhetoric or the teaching of writing. To see what has been taught in these courses is to see how easy it can be to teach almost anything in a freshman composition course but writing. Most freshman comp courses with literature in them became courses in literature, not writing. So the crucial question one must pose when thinking of a course in composition that will use literature is <u>how</u> one will use the literature. The problem of the old courses is that they were inefficient: the student was required to perform a whole variety of tasks none of which seemed in any way to complement the other. What one has to take most care for in a course using literature to teach writing is that the tasks

be, as Carl Klaus of the University of Iowa would have it, consonant with each other, not dissonant.

That means, first of all, that one must choose the literature carefully so that it meets the students where they are, that they are materials students can read and which will stretch them intellectually. In the course where this plan was developed, a college prep program for underprepared high school students, the bridge program for our Upward Bound program--a good percentage of whom wer black, the rest poor rural white, with an occasional Mesqawkie Indian from the Tama settlement near Decorah--we took great pains to find stories that were from the black, the rural Midwestern, particularly Czech and Scandinavian, and native American experiences. The point was not simply to interest each in their own stories, though that was our first aim, but also to get each of them into stories different from their own experiences, stories they could share with each other, that would help them understand more about each other and give the class a sense of community.

When we chose that literature, we also took care to choose stories that we could arrange in some sequence of intellectual difficulty. We took our sequence from Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse. We began the readings with the play Ceremonies in Dark Old Men by Lonne Elder III and then moved through, in order, My Antonia by Willa Cather, Giants in the Earth by Ole Rølvaag, Black Elk Speaks as recorded by John Neihardt, American Daughter by Era Bell Thompson, plus some autobiographical essays by children of immigrants, essays not quite story and not quite rigorous analysis. We ended up the course with a chapter from Oscar Handlin's Race and Nationality in American Life, Soul on Ice and other essays like it. We moved, as is obvious, from drama to history, not very high up Moffett's scale, but enough so that students could

begin to read the kinds of material they would be asked to read in other, more abstract, courses. These choices of literature can vary as much as the place and time vary, but they demand as much judgment from the teacher as any other part of the course. Considerations of literary questions such a genre are not appropriate at this point: we would never teach students in this class about the history of the genre and its characteristics. What seems most important at this point is finding good stories considered worthy of study that would reflect the lives of those in the class.

After choosing the texts, the second thing one must do is sequence the kinds of writing assignments one makes. Again, one should have some intellectually developmental scheme in mind. Ours was not unlike the scheme in Moffett or Britton's The Development of Writing Abilities. That is to say, we began the writing with simple "expressive" responses to the literature and moved from those to more shaped and intellectually abstract tasks. After the students have read Ceremonies in Dark Old Men we asked them simply to write anything about their reactions to the play, anything at all, freely responding to it with little regard for how the teachers would grade it (for we would not) or how someone else might take it. That first week (and the course I am describing was a 6 week summer course, but it can be expanded over the semester with similar planning and results for this plan is essentially the plan we use in our regular Freshman English course with quite a different set of books) we read their writings and talking to them about their responses to the play, trying to discover with them the thing in the story that interested them the most and that seemed worth their exploring further. We dittoed out some of their writings after they had written more and brought them to class where the students talking about these writings with the class. By the end of the first week we had gotten them to focus on one thing in the play, the

thing which they had found most compelling to them and would be interested in writing more about. We then dittoed those papers for workshops and had them read each other's papers and comment on them. At no time during the week did we talk about the play without having our talk clearly tied to some writing task. We trusted the literature to cause in them responses they would want to begin to explain.

What we were teaching them was the fundamental principle of Christensen: we make our point by adding. By asking the students repeatedly to say more about what they meant, and by asking them to write more, we taught addition as a simple task, but one that was utterly basic to the next weeks of the course. An interesting insight that we gained from this was that adding is always done in light of the audience. As we deepened the concept of adding by teaching the idea of levels of generality, the students began to see that as readers of each others' papers, they didn't need to retell the story: they needed to interpret the story. So when they added, they had to add at varying levels of generality to make their point. To be precise about how we taught that, we would call for a sentence from someone in the class about the book and then ask for another. Pretty soon we would have a paragraph and then we would go back and look to see how the thing fit together. It was fairly easy for them to see after a few times that some sentences generated better additions than others and some second sentences seemed more interesting than others. Even though many of them could not explain what a subordinate or coordinate idea was, they could see that the sentences either did or did not fit under the head sentence. And, at this time they also began to see that one had to know the book in order to add meaningfully. They began to argue about whether or not the second sentence was right or not. When challenged to prove or disprove their objection, they had always to return to the text. While we were still only talking, it seemed, about writing, we also were teaching close reading.

In constructing the paragraph we were doing literary criticism of the most elementary, but fundamental, kind. They had to know the text to interpret it. And because they all shared the experience of the text, they could critique each others' thinking processes. Moffett, Bruner and others all write of the importance of helping students at about this age become conscious of their thinking processes and this system did that if nothing else.

By the third week when we were reading Giants in the Earth we taught a very limited, and most likely not at all true to the intentions of Pike, Becker and Young, understanding of the TRI paragraph. That concept is, once again, a way to talk about adding, only this time it is still more refined that levels of generality. The pattern, Topic, Restriction, Illustration, is also more clearly a pattern that produces abstractions and exposition. The levels of generality patterns still allow prose narrative, a point which the literature has, perhaps, not examined closely enough. The TRI pattern literally forces expostion. Once again when we asked for sentences from the class, they had to know the text and be able to explain why a sentence was not restricting the first sentence or why it did. We also discovered at this time, how personal the Restriction is. After it was stated, the students could supply an Illustration from the text. That was of some interest for it showed that, though the higher abstractions were their own, they had to go to the text to prove their point. That pattern of thinking involved in TRI, as it taught them how to think and write, forced them once again into the text.

It was not long from that discovery to the fourth step in our sequence: the thesis statement. We discovered quite to our surprise that putting two sentences together of differing levels of generality produced a thesis statement, one that could generate an entire paper. Later, we realized we had reinvented Aristotle's enthymeme as we read in Walter Ong how that form has come to be misunderstood in these latter days.[1] According to them, Boethius in his reading

of Aristotle took the enthymeme to mean a faulty syllogism, one which was imperfect because it left out one of its premises. Logicians since that time have interpreted the enthymeme to be, because of its imperfections, a sign that rhetoric was a sly, dishonest discipline, that resulted in the shameless manipulation of the audience. But that is to seriously misunderstand the enthymeme--it is quite another thing. The unstated premise is, according to Aristotle, one shared with the audience, a commonplace, or main premise, that can be discovered if one looks in the enthymeme for the syllogism that is implied in it. But the thing about the enthymeme which makes it so fundamental to the rhetorician is that the content of those premises is in the realm of the probable, something about which people can deliberate. It is the probableness of a premise that is the very life of rhetoric, hence the statement, or insight, by Aristotle, that the rhetorical syllogism is the enthymeme. Literature is a good place to teach the enthymeme because there is not a right answer to the question of what or how the story means. The teacher's interpretation is not the right one--in literature there is no such thing as the correct interpretation. And any interpretation, no matter how studied or brilliant, can always profit from discussion with others. It is at the heart of our program that people feel they can enter into dialogue with any speaking or writing they encounter and this form helps that encounter along.

Our finding the enthymeme reaffirmed our sense that we had indeed been teaching rhetoric and that teaching students how to write about the story was teaching them how to think, how to make external realities internal intellectual constructs of the mind. By the fifth week the patterns of thought with which we had begun the course were becoming habits of mind. While developing those habits of mind, the students had also read closely a great deal of good lit-

erature. Their experience of the world had grown and expanded. They were not, if you will, quite the same people. They had become a community of thinkers, not only because they had learned how to think together, but also because they shared each others' stories along the way. The stories had been the matter of their learning and the structures they learned to make of it had been the manner, the technique (to use terms out of the ancient's constructs).

The plan may sound as though it slights literature. One would do much more with literature in other literature courses. But the third major point to make is that it is clear from this experience that the students deeply experienced the literature because it was such a central part of the course and their thinking and writing processes. This plan allows the students to experience the story at the level of richness that they are able to. We know from the work with the intellectual growth of children, that it is the way, as Moffett puts it, "children utter themselves."[1] And this utterance is necessary both in reading and writing. The students we had were not all that far from their childhood, and, given the effects of TV on them, not as developed intellectually as they might have been. The story is still where most of them are. Chronology is something they understand and the concrete detail of setting and character, those essential parts of story, given them a way into the fictive world and their symbolic experience of it. Whether that experience is an experience very like their own or completely foreign to them they literally need that experience to grow and develop mentally. Though there are other ways to prove the importance of story to the young mind, the psychological proof may be the proof this age will most readily hear. Bruno Bettelheim in his book The Uses of Enchantment explains the importance of fairy tales--and by that he means great literature--in the mental and emotional development of the child. He writes

> For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties; while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality--and this without ever belittling, but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and his future.[2]

According to this theory, having students read great literature is fundamental to the liberating of the human being into a fully mature and satisfying life. Literature frees them so they can deal with several ideas at once, with attitudes and characters which may be threatening to them in real life, but which in fiction, they can deal with. It helps, in several ways, in the decentering process so necessary to mental and emotional growth.

We as teachers of literature can trust the story to work on its own. And we can also trust that making the story the material of the writing activity in the class, from their initial responses to their more abstract constructions, will have further illuminated the literature for them and intensified their experiences of it. Before one can show how thought works, one has to have some stuff to think about. The story gives the class a body of words and experiences they can share, vastly increasing the possibilities for intellectual growth in the class: since they know what their classmates are thinking about, they can begin to critique their classmates thought processes. We never had to stop the course to give them something to think about--something that often happens in regular rhetoric texts. This attempt to make the instruction of the class consonant with the materials and tasks assigned, helped, we think, make the class more efficient in its use of time, more deft.

The thesis of this paper, in the formula of the enthymeme, is that one

can use literature in a writing course if one carefully chooses the literature, if one carefully sequences the writing assignments so they make some kind of developmental sense, and, if one always uses the writing activity to clarify the students' thinking about the literature. It takes great care on our part as teachers who might secretly prefer to teach literature, to make certain that the writing is the single focus of the class. In the summer course we had world enough and time to demand written work every day and we were able to respond both orally and in writing to the work of our students. And we made sure the students got plenty of responses to their papers from the class. The workshop is fundamental. The only reading about literature in the class should be what the students write about it.

The beauty of teaching literature as the material of a writing class is that it is so interpretable. The concrete details of the story are there and the generalizations about those materials are for the students to make. That causes the student to learn the patterns of expostion which are fundamental to the intellectual life, the critical intelligence democracies need to survive. We teach them the patterns of exposition by using the older more accessible patterns of narrative, the pattern they are more familiar with. At the age of 18 they are just getting ready to trade what Moffett calls "the loss of reality for a gain in control."

Perhaps a final word need be said about those who fear that such a course is only for those students who are advanced in their competencies and who do not need the fundamentals of writing. Given the schemes of knowledge with which we worked, it is somewhat difficult to understand that objection. It sometimes seems to us that underprepared students could read literature far more capably than they could rigorously analytic prose of the kind they would

meet in other courses throughout the college. Though it is possible that we could have achieved good results by teaching them how to read such prose as intensively as we taught them how to write, they simply were at sea when given some of the Handlin prose. Even the ancient struggles of Telemachos are far more immediate to these students than some highly abstract concept such as acculturation.

We are caught in an ethical dilemma: should we teach our students to write standard American edited prose of the kind the business community wants, the kind Jane Addams heard businessmen in her time asking for, the kind of people who can "write legibly and . . . figure accurately and quickly: . . . acquire habits of punctuality and order; . . . be prompt to obey; and you will fit them to make their way as I have made mine." Or should we teach them more than that?

Richard Ohmann in his book English in America deplores the fact that too often we have done precisely the kind of writing and thinking which does not critique the system, but perpetuates and supports it. I have an uneasy feeling when I hear of English classes where students are learning only to write the prose of business, that we are doing something we wouldn't quite have to be doing. It is possible, along with the abilities the commercial and governmental establishments require of their students, to teach more than that. In fact not to may well be capitulating entirely to the system. Jane Addams, who work is too little read these days, accuses public educators of a kind of elitism which does not teach the culturally deprived what is best in the culture because we do not fully share the best with all. We have not been democratic, she charges, because we have not fed the starving imaginations of all. But she says it better than I:

> As the poet bathes the outer world for us in the hues of human feeling, so the workman needs some one to bathe his surroundings with a human significance--some one who shall teach him to find that which will give a potency to his life. His education, however simple, should tend to make him widely at home in the world, and to give him a sense of simplicity and peace in the midst of the triviality and noise to which he is constantly subjected. He, like other men, can learn to be content to see but a part, although it must be a part of something.
>
> It is because of a lack of democracy that we do not really incorporate him in the hopes and advantages of society, and give him that place which is his by simple right. We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class; but we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having. 3

This plan which has worked for us may help students write well enough to make it in the system at the same time it strives to feed and nurture the human potential of each of the studerts so they can grow beyond the skills required of them by the system. The literature they read can give them some sense of their human significance, of their part, as it also gives them the power and knowledge to change their lot in society or the very shape of the society in which they find themselves.

Notes

[1]James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 49.

[2]Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 5.

[3]Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), pp. 219-220.